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NATURAL DISASTER REDUCTION: DROUGHT MANAGEMENT

Technical session

Programme

The technical session on drought management has been organized by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO).

The speakers for the session are as follows: Professor Dr. H.-G. Bohle (Germany), Mr. R.C.A. Jain (India), Mr. R.T. Mugwara (Zimbabwe), a representative of the Government of Australia (not yet confirmed). Statements will also be made by representatives of FAO, the World Food Programme (WFP), and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD).

Format and objectives of the session

The presentation is organized in two parts, followed by a panel discussion. Part one outlines the state of art of drought management, including early warning systems at the global and national scales; preparedness planning for drought; assessing vulnerable populations; and emergency relief strategies, as well as rehabilitation and mitigation of agricultural production systems. Part two consists of a demonstration of the application, at the national and regional levels, of preparedness, relief and mitigation in drought-prone areas.

The focus of the presentation is less on relief operations at the occurrence of drought than on techniques to forecast drought and its impact, as well as on devising management systems, supporting policies and institutions to evolve sustainable agricultural production in drought-prone areas.

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Drought cannot be avoided, but its impact on human lives and property and its consequences on national economies can be reduced. Traditional farming and pastoral systems have been well adapted to absorb drought-shocks. A combination, however, of reduced rainfall, particularly in the Sahel region, increased population pressures and resulting overuse of natural resources, have led to land degradation and an ever-worsening cycle of crop failures due to drought. It is becoming clear that drought is both an emergency and a development issue since it affects both short-term consumption and long-term development.

The short-term impact of drought on human livelihood depends essentially on the efficiency and timeliness of the relief response, the effectiveness of which will in turn be increased by early prediction of droughts and well-planned response mechanisms. In the long run, the challenge is to devise management strategies and supporting policies that can reduce the physical, biological, economic and social impact of drought and enhance food security on a sustainable basis.

Advances in satellite and communication technologies enable early warning systems to provide more reliable information on the monitoring of vegetation and impending food crisis. Early warning that is not well integrated with decision-making and response mechanisms will not, however, achieve its objectives. Local participation is essential in the design, implementation and evaluation of preparedness measures if they are to have a chance to succeed.

The major objectives of mitigation efforts are not only to abate the impact of the current emergency but also to shorten the period of recovery and, in the long term, to reduce vulnerability to future food emergencies.

Diversification is a key to reducing the structural vulnerability of livelihood systems in drought-prone, degraded areas. Almost all technical innovations require some type of investment. Hence, there is a need to secure land tenure. There is a basis for investment in resilience, with a reasonable expectation of returns. In most drought-afflicted parts of Africa, for example, the impact of drought can be considerably reduced by investment in soil and water conservation, drought-resistant crop varieties, improved communications and better crop storage and handling. Improvements in those areas are not directly aimed at the provision of a safety net for household consumption; rather, the objective is to maintain both production and household productive assets, thus defending long-term food security. While not eliminating the need for better reactive capabilities, such investment can reduce the impact of drought as expressed in high levels of rural poverty, low levels of agricultural growth and destabilizing swings in national income.

As for the development of sustainable agricultural production systems that can absorb drought-shocks, numerous technologies are available and will be briefly summarized in the presentation. These include soil and water conservation measures, drought tolerant crop varieties, fertilization techniques and agro-forestry.